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ABSTRACT

The nature and process of participatory discussion are discussed, and reference is made to the British system of tutor-led groups. It is suggested that discussion is the essence of university life, since it can be used to discover the ways in which students view the knowledge and principles that the scholar presents. Discussion also provides the opportunity for students to demonstrate the relevance of their perceptions to the accumulated knowledge the scholar represents. Attention is also directed to the following discussion processes and skills: listening, responses, silence, moving a discussion forward, summarizing, evaluation, interpretation, the connections that should be made, questions, and habits. In addition, the following factors that inhibit discussion are noted: shyness, the size of the group and the lack of opportunity to participate, and tutors or students that talk too much. It is suggested that to facilitate participation, the tutor might ask students to think about a particular topic before the group meets. Another approach would be to change the group's format (e.g., subgroups can work together on a small project that engages them in forming their own views). Ways to encourage the talkative to listen are also noted. (SW)

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TEACHING IN HIGHER EDUCATION SERIES : 4

ED230101

Suggestions for the consideration of lecturers and others concerned with teaching in higher education

PARTICIPATORY DISCUSSION

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FOREWORD

This booklet is one of a series produced with the aid of a grant from the University Grants Committee as part of its programme for the development of knowledge about and skill in teaching in higher education. The series is intended to bring together traditional wisdom (not a source to be neglected) research findings when available and relevant, and summaries of what is regarded by the informed as good practice.

The sub-title "Suggestions for the consideration of those concerned ..." echoes that of a famous manual for the guidance of elementary school teachers and this series shares the same purpose. The handbooks may at times be mildly hortatory but they are not meant to be prescriptive. Teaching is something of an art and the aim is to encourage, within sensible limits, something of a personal style. The "rules" (if such they be) are constantly broken by successful teachers but few, if any, get away with breaking all the rules all the time.

Universities and other institutions of higher education have traditionally accepted research and teaching as their principal functions. The systems developed for training in research are well worked out. Till now little has been done for teaching. The initiative taken by the University Grants Committee was widely welcomed and has led to an increasing awareness in higher education generally of the importance of giving to the teaching function the attention it deserves. This series is intended to offer help to those who wish to make an effort to improve their teaching. It is hoped that those who read these pages will, as a result, be better prepared for this important aspect of their daily work.

The authors would be glad to receive reports and illustrative material which readers may wish to send with a view to improving the next edition of these booklets.

C.F. CARTER
Vice-Chancellor
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PREFACE TO THE FOUR BOOKLETS ON SMALL GROUP TEACHING

WORKING TOGETHER	PARTICIPATORY DISCUSSION
A KIND OF LEARNING	PATTERNS AND PROCEDURES

Seminars and tutorials, though sometimes formally defined, embrace a wide range of activities; choices must be made. These booklets are to introduce the new tutor to the strengths and weaknesses of the small group and to ways of organising it for different purposes. We describe:

Group behaviour.
This is the main part of "Working Together".

Strategies for making group work more effective.
These are the strategies for improving a group's working together (in "Working Together") and strategies for achieving different intellectual objectives, set out in "Patterns and Procedures" and "A Kind of Learning".

Tactics small group tutors can use.
Group management and discussion skills are described in "Working Together" and "Participatory Discussion". The organisation of group work and the usefulness of different procedures are discussed in "Patterns and Procedures".

What can be learned through small group work.
This is what "A Kind of Learning" is about; group learning is discussed in relation to the claims of enthusiasts, research studies and some examples of group activities.

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INTRODUCTION

This booklet is about the nature and process of participatory discussion. As you will see from the general preface to our four booklets about small group teaching "Patterns and Procedures" is the booklet that deals with the choice of activities and procedures. Participatory discussion has not been included in it for two reasons. Firstly, discussion is an element in almost all forms of group work, but while other forms of activity can be decided upon and planned for with confidence, in leaving a space for discussion one cannot be sure that it will take place. To start with the tutor must give some thought to what kind of discussion he envisages as forming some part of a seminar or tutorials; there is more than one form of discussion. (These are outlined in Part 1 of this booklet). How well does the tutor's imagined discussion combine with the rest of the group's activities? Freely participatory discussion, for example, does not always fit easily into a formal didactic seminar; it may spring to life spontaneously when a pause is created but one cannot ordinarily expect this to happen. The social nature of the small group affects interactive learning such as participatory discussion. The skills a tutor uses in a participatory discussion group are allied to what can be called group management or social skills; in seeking to create a learning situation in which students freely discuss the work they have prepared the tutor tries to encourage working relationships. "Working Together" is

a necessary complement to "Participatory Discussion".

Secondly, while we do not wish to create the impression that participatory discussion is the only significant form of small group teaching, and that it uniquely fosters the one true learning as some advocates suggest, we do feel there is a balance to redress. We are on controversial ground here. In saying that if a tutor's purpose is to foster participatory discussion his role is ideally not a directive one we do not say that tutors ideally always play non-directive roles. Far from it. Participatory discussion is only one kind of group work. And though interaction is essential to a small discussion group social relations are no more the primary concern here than they are in any other small group in university teaching. The particular concern of small discussion groups is with the intellectual development of individual students. But most newly appointed lecturers are basically anxious to demonstrate that mastery of their subject they rightly feel is required of all teachers. They wish to be seen to teach competently, knowledgeably and consequently actively. The lecture often seems to be the true test of professional competence; in his lectures the university teacher measures himself against his new peers. Small group work may seem to be less demanding. Especially for the young tutor in the humanities or social sciences this is comfortable and familiar ground; the challenge, if any, is from those he has for the time being outstripped. The tutor talks happily to his seminar group. But often this becomes a discourse; the didactic manner is easily adopted. And students complain, they do complain, that many tutors use small groups for continuing the exposition and

explanation that begins in lectures. And tutors begin to feel hard-worked; it is tedious and tiring to give the same talk several times over to different groups. Now the general view is that the lecture is where the university teacher expounds a subject and the small group is where the students consolidate what they have been learning, clarify their understanding and correct their misconceptions. We have attached weight to participatory discussion by treating it in isolation, in doing so we mean to make learning seem more important than teaching.

Teaching is more than telling; the good teacher is also a skilled listener. Sometimes discussion, but not freely participatory discussion, is directed and the tutor plays a central and positive part; he may correct and re-phrase students' contributions and invite individuals to speak by name. But on other occasions - for example when small groups are used to develop critical judgment - the tutor is slow to respond in this way. Students face the difficult task of making discriminations and finding their own words to express their views; the tutor does not do this for them. Participatory discussion as we describe it can be seen as the limit situation in this direction. We hope that consideration of it will help you to decide just what kind of discussion you hope to foster in particular groups and how you can best achieve it.

Part I of this booklet is "The Nature of Discussion". It speculates about the importance of discussion in university life and the particular value of participatory discussion - a form of discussion that to some may seem less disciplined

than is proper to a formal teaching situation. Spoken words are the medium of discussion; it takes time to find the right ones. Some degree of informality may encourage students to contribute their own words. Part II: "The Process of Discussion" is about discussion skills such as how to listen and how to ask questions. Part III: "Not Everyone Takes Part" is obviously about the problem of participation. How far should the tutor go in attempting to draw out the reticent students? How can he go about it? And should too talkative students be discouraged?

We briefly sum up in Part IV: "The Swing of the Pendulum" and begin to move back towards the central position that what is important is the kind of learning the tutor seeks to initiate in small group teaching. Over-emphasis of the need for interaction ignores the fact that a twentieth century university cannot provide each student with a place for as long as he would wish to be there or indeed might personally need to be there if he is to master his subject. Timetables, syllabuses and assessment are necessary impositions when the intake and graduation of students has to be regulated. Much small group work may have to be disciplined and kept moving along from topic to topic. The next booklet in this series is "Small Group Teaching III: A Kind of Learning". This is of central importance. To be effective the small group tutor must know what kind of learning he wishes to foster but he must consider how much time there is for learning too.

PART I

THE NATURE OF DISCUSSION

1. DISCUSSION IS THE ESSENCE OF UNIVERSITY LIFE

Perhaps this depends on who is speaking to whom. There are established conventions and procedures for the forwarding of discussion between scholars and a consensus of attitudes and shared values, at least in respect of the value of the argument. The scholar is concerned to establish meaningful relations between his own thought and work and that both of the authoritative past and the speculative present. But he is also concerned with the movement of worlds wider than his academic territory. It is through teaching that he demonstrates the validity of his studies to each new generation of students and in discussion that he can most directly show relevance to their concerns and their experience. No other university activity has greater potential for mutual influence. The students' values, attitudes and purposes may differ widely from their tutor's both as a person and in relation to his subject. He uses discussion to discover the ways in which his students view the knowledge and principles he expounds, what they understand and misunderstand, judged by the criteria of his discipline, and what it is they hope to gain from their studies. Conversely it is also their opportunity to demonstrate the relevance of their perceptions to the accumulated knowledge he represents. In a sense it can

be seen as an exchange of opinion and information about the contemporary world.

The new students and the new tutor have much to learn from each other in the small group. Teaching methods like the lecture provide better opportunities for exposition and explanation - the activities towards which the inexperienced teacher is often drawn: to tell is to teach. Discussion and other small group teaching methods should correct the balance.

No other way of teaching is as popular with students[1] and few arouse greater expectations. Many new tutors too come hopefully to discussion groups. But the students may seem unco-operative and unresponsive. And it is reported that there are often discrepancies between the expressed objectives of tutors beginning a group meeting and the experiences described by the students coming out afterwards.[2] How is the gap to be bridged? It could simply be filled in by the tutor lecturing. But the best bridges are built by constructive work from both sides aided by a proper flow of information.

There are several points that should be cleared up before a group has its first working session; unresolved, these questions may block communication. Everyone should be quite sure

* what the group's tasks are, why they were chosen and what they are meant to achieve;
* how their work will be organised and how particular kinds of enquiry are logically pursued;
* that there is preparatory work for both tutor and students to do.

Common ground is discussed, with examples, in "Patterns and Procedures". When a topic or issue is chosen for discussion care must be taken to ensure that it is many-sided and open to discussion if possible at more than one level and in terms familiar to the students. If the topic is prepared by only one of the students, or the tutor, and this is the common ground for the group meeting then presentation of the topic should not be thorough. If the presenter makes all the obvious points and covers all the more immediately interesting aspects of it then it is unlikely that the rest of the group will have much to say. How much preparation is made and by whom is going to depend on what the group's work is directed towards achieving. It will also depend on the kind of discussion that is envisaged and that is our concern here.

Discussion is a portmanteau word; it can mean several things. A discussion can be more or less formal. Examples of forms are

* the traditional seminar where a student defends a written paper
* a panel discussion as in syndicate work[3] where a group reports on work they have done together as a team and are subjected to questioning in the full class
* a discussion like a board meeting where each student has a specific contribution to make and they are called upon to do so in logical order.

A discussion can be more or less directed by the tutor. Disciplined discussion can be ensured either by firm direction or by agreed orderly procedures and rules that

allow the tutor to be primus inter pares. (For an example of how this can be done see 'The Advanced Seminar' in "Patterns and Procedures" or the full account given of this method in a paper by its author, Nisbet.)[4] When the tutor directs discussion he calls on individuals to speak at specific points, intervenes to summarise, correct and re-direct the flow of discussion. He sets bounds on relevance, asks for views to be substantiated and so forth. A discussion can be in part formally conducted, when the tutor, or individual students expound a point and defend it; and in part given over to free and exploratory discussion. Finally a discussion can be freely participatory and yet unobtrusively managed by the tutor. It is the techniques for encouraging and sustaining this kind of discussion that we describe fully in Part II.

Of course it is easy to say "We will have this kind of discussion or that kind of discussion" and equally of course it often turns out to be something else. This is particularly true of less formal meetings. The tutor is often happy that this is the case. Nevertheless, thinking about what you would like a meeting to be before it takes place, and thinking about how you intend to conduct it and why may at least protect you against excesses that you did not wish to allow - like a mini-lecture or half an hour of what is little better than gossiping. Participatory discussion is somewhat like conversation. If spaces are to be left while the students think a point over, if there are to be pauses to allow more hesitant individuals to contribute, everyone must relax a little and learn to take their time. The discussion will be unevenly paced, sometimes inconsequential,

sometimes it will be irritatingly diffuse. But diffuseness permits participation at different levels; prohibit this by rigorously controlling contributions and not everyone may be able to join in. Accuracy is to an extent traded off for greater participation. It can be a long and uphill journey to arrive at a point where such discussion is both open and rigorous. It is part of its virtues that this kind of discussion "catches people where they are"[5] and where they are is the point at which to begin learning if they are to make a subject their own.

2. SPOKEN WORDS

Spoken words are the medium of discussion. Whose words? The tutor does well to become obsessed with "their own words". If the learning the tutor means to foster is to do with clarifying understanding, consolidating what has been learned elsewhere and practising judgment it must begin with "people where they are". Many students do learn by imitation. This is a good route to learning which criteria to use and how to deliver judgment. Is it the way to learn how to exercise judgment?

Words can have a life of their own. In discussions the tutor must avoid engagement in a relationship with what <u>he</u> says. The successful academic is accustomed to finding precise and aesthetically pleasing verbal formulations that exactly embody his thoughts. This is a developed skill and gives him a feeling for a certain 'rightness' of expression. Few undergraduates have such skills to any marked degree but many quickly perceive the approbation that rewards neat phrases and

become adept at making collages of disguised quotations. This becomes an entertaining game for both students and tutor - as well as being part of a genuine assimilation of language forms. (Higher forms of the game include the student putting his own words into quotation marks and when he is really advanced he can present attributed quotations of his own making as well as more elaborate pastiche.) But that is a digression. One wants to know honestly where they are and not how skilled at word-camouflage! Their own words are important in so far as they are expressions of their own thoughts. Some students never try to get at the point of what they read. You must encourage them to do so and then explore how individual meanings vary. "What does this statement mean?" "What do you mean by it?" One skill the tutor must therefore master is that of listening! This topic is taken up again in "A Kind of Learning".

And ask questions. When they present points in conventional words try to get them to clothe these in their own wordier meanings. Do not re-phrase statements for them but ask them to expand what they mean, clarify what they say, to think about the precise meaning of their words and try to explain it in relation to the phenomenal world. One of the lesser reasons for 'your own words' being a poor educational instrument is that your polished periods and lucid expressions may not be models which the students wish to emulate. They will imitate but where 'rightness' is demonstrably a criterion not only are people unwilling to expose their ignorance but they will keep their cobbled phrases to themselves once they perceive how ungainly they may be. Lengthy articulate monologues will, of course, simply stun them.(6)

PART II
THE PROCESS OF DISCUSSION

"Speech is for the convenience of those who are hard of hearing".(7) We are not the first to use Thoreau's words as a hook from which to hang the loquacious. We shall expatiate on how little the tutor needs to say - if his purpose is to be effective in generating discussion amongst his students. We shall concentrate on what we call free or open discussion since it is less likely that new tutors need to be encouraged to be directive. And while the techniques that may foster the free and open exchange of views can equally serve the tutor who intends to manage his students firmly those habits most characteristic of the authoritative leader are proscribed in the open group. (See 'The Seminar' for an example of directed discussion in "Patterns and Procedures".)

Discussion is a tapestry of speech and silences. Tutors often ask for advice on how to cope with excess of either element. We shall dispense some, but our primary concern is with the quality of responses that are made to other people's contributions. We shall naturally begin with listening.

In everything said here the tutor is firmly in mind as the person addressed, but much of what is said could also be a useful guide to students. Talking about

talking is somewhat unreal. The reader should make constant reference to his own experience as a check on what we say. Look, too, at the video-taped recordings of actual group discussions that have been made under the aegis of those with a rightful claim to expertise.(8)

The bias of what is said here implies that the tutor has two duties. He must not let his knowledge, words and judgment come between a student and his embryonic understanding nor between one student and another. He must also do everything he can to encourage students to look again at what they say, to listen to each other, and to accommodate each other's judgments and interpretations. We hope that they will come to recognise that their own judgment is modified both in expressing it and in the light of that of others. The tutor imposes a severe discipline on himself - refraining from correcting what the students say, from re-phrasing, interpreting and making all the connections on their behalf. This is an heroic task.

1. LISTENING

It is a donnish fault to listen too alertly. Command of the language of his discipline and over-exposure to its cliches, familiarity with all the commonly expressed views and all the uncommonly expressed views leads many a don (particularly the young?) to be over-quick in picking up another's meaning. Thus he develops a man's inferences, crowns his sentences with a conclusion that might never have been reached and goes on to a reply that was formulated almost before the poor fellow had begun to speak. Such dons should

sharpen each other's wits. The blunt, the diffuse and the confused learn through saying things for themselves, from being listened to and from being encouraged to analyse what they have said. It is the quality of the attention paid to the less articulate student that may encourage him to try saying something another way or to tighten his phrasing - and not a quick tying up that could even alter the pattern he hoped he might weave from the loose ends. Let him finish his paragraphs.

"The seminar leader who is not sensitive to pace, and to the spaces between words, is likely to find that discussion becomes, if not competitive, then the monopoly of the quick and articulate".(6) When it does so, try the stop-watch game. Rule that 15 seconds must elapse after each contribution and then ask everyone if the meaning of what was said is clear to them. If so, then "Could you explain what it was?" and if not, then the original speaker is asked to clarify it.

Have you heard the quick and articulate playing 'monopoly'? "This way of ... is a false analogy". "Quite, but I think ..." or "Right, and in addition of course ...". The experts take breath only when syntax leads you to expect it least and their language bristles with grappling irons ("Wait, I am irresistibly reminded ..."), over-riding phrases, conjunctions and parentheses like "This is part of the explanation I'll give it you in full", or "One of the causes, I'll give you three ...". And then compare the skilled interviewer. "This way of ... is a false analogy". Silence. After a while, "Do you think all such analogies are false?" or "Didn't

you also say that ...?"

Good listening behaviour such as looking at the speaker, not interrupting, having an attentive expression, is easy to fake while the 'listener' prepares his refutation or a connection to what he wished to say anyway. It is rewarding to the speaker if one does look at him. He in turn should have a care to look around quite often to show that everyone else is part of the group and a likely and important possible contributor. The speaker will notice too when someone looks at him as a signal that they wish to join in and will acknowledge this.[9]

But positive listening means more than an attentive expression. It requires effort to listen with discrimination and sympathy, deferring judgment, searching for the real meaning of what is being said, looking for the speaker's patterns of speech and what is behind them and trying to see why he says what he says in the way that he does.

It is probable that unspoken words can be assembled into thought units at about twice the speed of utterance (say 400 words per minute to a moderately fast 200 for speech). It is difficult for a listener not to run ahead of what he hears as he silently responds.[10] Thus he anticipates what will be said too hastily at times and is too quick to shape the points being made into a pattern that belongs to his own, and not the speaker's, understanding of the subject. It is this that in turn will shape his answer and the direction he then gives to the discussion. Clearly a tutor, informed,

imbued with feeling for the structure and logic of the discipline, must make a conscious effort to avoid this.

He might try to listen with greater empathy as we have already suggested. He could also check over the connections that are not made explicit. Have they been seen? If no other student takes up the thread then the tutor will be able to explore gaps by asking "I didn't quite understand what you meant by ...", or "Could you explain a little further what ...?" One never says "Did you mean ...?" and fills it out - the answer is almost invariably "Yes". The tutor could look too to see how concerned a student is to be 'right' and whose approbation he seeks. Instead of anticipating what the speaker says one could try anticipating who will reply and in what way. Where students are similarly urged to listen with imaginative sympathy they also need to review an argument as it goes along, actively screening what is pertinent from what illustrates it and trying to anticipate points germane to it.

2. RESPONSES

The responsibility for responding to what people say is one that the whole group should share. It would be ridiculous to suppose that all remarks deserve comment but students do need a positive response. People are guilty of ignoring what doesn't interest them or of saying flatly "Yes" or "I see". The responses that should be cultivated are those of acknowledgement and acceptance. If people are quick to reply all is well but contributions are always uneven and it is part of the climate of effective group work that where there is

no immediate reply a positive response is still made when someone speaks. Words are not always necessary.

As far as the tutor in particular is concerned we are clearly not encouraging him to say how he approves or disapproves of what is said. We are pointing to the supportive role which everyone should be ready to play. "We should respect and support the student's own stumbling and striving ... towards the insight he is reaching for".(11) Tutors could be said to be guilty of over-responding to things that do interest them. Restraint is the watchword. Tutors are never equal members of a group. Behaving as if they were, picking up something of interest, developing it, they effortlessly become more equal than all the others - talking for over 50% of the time.(12) If there are bounds to the discussion these should have been agreed beforehand for tutors are also guilty of being too quick to nudge people towards a hidden agenda. Where no-one replies then the tutor can use the tactic of repeating something of what has been said, with minimal additional content or none at all, reflecting it back into the group.(13) This is the response to a long blank pause that is calculated to revive a topic if it has not died its natural death.

3. SILENCE

Here is the new tutor, his loquaciousness stubbed, his participation restricted at every point, his dialectical skills, knowledge and verbal facilities ruled to be inadmissible. What is he to say? Nothing springs to mind - and he may need to practise saying nothing.

Tutors are indicted over and over again for abusing silence. They just cannot leave it alone. Students allegedly use it - as a powerful weapon to force the tutor to take back the irksome responsibility for what goes on, i.e. to speak.

What can you do with silence? Let it spread for a while. It is a contribution you are making. How is it received? Silences should never be ambiguous nor open to interpretation as hostility. Let your part of it be mild and accepting! After a while we would suggest that you repeat one or two things that have been said to see whether everything that could be said has been ventilated.

4. MOVING A DISCUSSION FORWARD

In an open discussion this too is a responsibility everyone shares. There are some well-known techniques for effecting progression. Questions that require definite answers are one. Summarising, in particular a summarising question that asks for a definite response, is another. The group can be invited to talk about how satisfactory or disappointing their examination of an issue has been so far. Should they take up some point to probe a little more or move into another area? If the group is formally organised perhaps they would like to move on to another stage or to skip this one? One would not imply that they should or should not take up any of these options but just offer them for consideration.

5. SUMMARISING

Always emphasise the progress that has been made. Inexperienced groups may need some visible evidence of this. A running review may meet the purpose, it can be kept up by students taking it in turn to make brief summaries or a statement of points. These might be written on the blackboard. Or provision can be made for each person to write a summary during an agreed pause. Students' summaries may preserve diversity more effectively than the tutor's. It is all too easy to impose a shape on amorphous exchanges and to make sharp conclusions that do not represent the diversity of views. At the time an individual may reject what the tutor says as being his understanding, but later, and especially if he dutifully noted it down, the tutor's summary may well become his own. His understanding and what he has learned become what the tutor says has been learned.[14] The necessary perception of progress can also be given by setting up systematic procedures for group meetings.

6. EVALUATION

What western speech forms are there that are a non-evaluative reply? "Uh-huh"? Is it true that most people's immediate response is to evaluate what is spoken within their own, the listener's, frame of reference? There is another game to play if this is a habit that needs reforming. Rule that no-one can speak until they have first "re-stated the ideas and feelings of the speaker, accurately and to that person's satisfaction".[15]

The students should certainly go on to evaluate what has

been said point by point; the tutor refrains. Relevance and 'rightness' are problems for tutors - ideally the group would control them. Relevance is easier, for if there are no bounds there are no bounds, while if context and limits have been agreed beforehand and talk wanders the issue can be raised. "I am beginning to wonder if you are going rather further into this than you intended, what do you think?" Correcting irrelevance in individual contributions is more difficult. In a good cohesive group it is paradoxical that on the one hand support is there for ventures and self-exposure but on the other the group may be over-tolerant of poor contributions. The tutor can try keeping a topic open and turning it back into the group until irrelevancies become apparent to everyone. Once the tutor begins evaluating ("That isn't strictly relevant". "Good point".) there will be an immediate shift towards centring further discussion on him. Tactful questioning may communicate some feeling for precision and may be used to draw attention to those implications of an issue that the students side-step. The tutor can similarly bring up related issues or innocently question the wider significance of what is being said when a group is inclined to go on beating to death a topic everyone understands.

Any topic that is suited to <u>open</u> discussion must be sufficiently open-ended to allow of degrees of 'rightness' and these should not be hierarchical. One must be wary of situations arising wherein tutor-evaluation determines that the only "meanings students are allowed to discover are those already perceived and codified".(16) There are always individuals who push towards this kind of situation by wanting all their

points to be ratified and all their enquiries sanctioned. Others will continually seek the gratification of acknowledged rightness. Try to wean them.

7. INTERPRETATION

Saying things for people regrettably becomes an addictive habit. One can see what they really mean but they have not quite said it. "Do you mean ...?" is always an assessment. It takes confidence to say "No". In the small group the tutor's way of sorting things out, his way of expressing points could be a necessary demonstration of what is sensible. But consider this way of responding to a student. "I see your point, if as you say, fresh-water snails do ... (here follows a concise re-statement of what the student did say) ... then there are parallels. Taking this to be a probable pattern one could, of course, go on to compare ... which is interesting in view of ...". Who is going to pick that up and compete?

It does not take students long to see that less effort is needed to start such a 'discussion'. "Do water snails do that?" "Do you mean do fresh-water snails...? Yes, they do. Assuming this would be a probable pattern, one could go on to compare ... which is interesting in view of ... What do you think?" "It looks like that." Silence.

We do not wish to be unfair. It is a normal part of receiving a verbal communication to translate it into one's own language and one often instinctively does so out loud to check the correctness of the interpretation. "Do you mean ...?" But in a teaching group the tutor's

language is the authorised version - not often disputed even when the translation is inaccurate. Everyone furthermore will copy its idioms and conventions to lend weight and 'rightness' to what they say. Where, then, are 'their own words'?

Perhaps if small group discussions preceded lectures more often that they do students, readier with their own interpretation of an issue to measure against the lecturer's presentation, would gain more from lectures. Their notes might reflect engagement in a dialogue no less active because it is not overt. Meanwhile within the small group if the sense of a student's contribution is not plain he should be asked to clarify it himself. If his thought is obscured by his language he should be asked to clarify specific terms. If his line of thought is not followed through he should be asked to attempt this himself. And the group as a whole should be expected to fit its own ideas together.

3. THE CONNECTIONS THAT SHOULD BE MADE

Critical analysis, evaluation and making connections at all levels between concepts from different sources are skills that the small group hopes to foster. The tutor will try not to make connections for people. But an elementary courtesy everyone in the group should practise is the habit of beginning a contribution to the discussion by placing it in the discussion. One states the connections between what one is going to say (or means to say!) and the specific points at which it interlocks with what has already been said by others. Not everyone picks up implied connections. (A recurrent problem for some

students in all lecture rooms, seminar rooms and booths in libraries is their uncertainty as to why they have come there. Students waste a lot of energy trying to find out just what it is they are supposed to be doing and why. They lack knowledge of how one part of a course relates to another and of the purposes they should have in mind as the initial framework for everything they do.)

9. QUESTIONS

It has been suggested that "A sound index of students' growing independence in the group is when they begin to question each other or to question the seminar leader".(17) We shall leave the new tutor to assess that statement. But accepting that questioning may be such an index we have a principle to guide a brief account of the use of questions.

A rule of thumb in the teaching profession used to be "Don't make statements, ask questions". Enclosing one's speeches in question marks might thus seem virtuous and a contribution to opening things up. The effect on the students may be quite contrary. "A question is an instrument of perception. Its form and assumptions determine the nature of its answer".(18)

One should begin then by considering the effect produced by the questions one habitually uses. What form do the answers take? Who usually answers? Who do you expect to answer? If a tutor answers most of his own questions all is not well. And do the students ask questions? Of whom? All their questions being directed

to the tutor would be another cause for misgiving.

Questions can fall into categories defined by their effect. Those requiring definite answers can shape and direct an enquiry. The questioning of individuals by the tutor is authoritative, and punitive too if it induces unnecessary personal anxiety. Probing questions often do. A question can also be a corrective statement. Silence or an acknowledgement commonly follow this, or a self-excusing disclaimer. Asking "Shall we look at the other side?" creates a closed system in implying opposition and only two sides to an argument.

Still, sometimes one needs to elicit what they know by asking direct and specific questions. This may be one of the only ways of finding out about blank areas since 'not-understanding' can seem an improper subject to raise. But beware of the temptation to conduct a brisk surface-action session. These are too easily monopolised. And in asking for information with the intention of encouraging someone to give a full description of events, try to form the question in a way that elicits a comprehensive answer. It is a mistake to make such an enquiry the first of a long checklist. Care means care for single questions are to be preferred to multiple ones - these may "blur the lines of response". (19)

On the other hand be wary of asking directly for judgments, especially early in a discussion or in relation to assigned work. People may withhold their quite well-formed ideas if assessment is in the offing. People may be unwilling to chance a judgment and they may not yet have thought of this issue in that way at all. Premature demands for

judgment - perhaps as part of a list of points the tutor brought with him as a guide to how things might go - may have a minimal response and deny students the opportunity to express and test ideas that may be in the forefront of their minds as a result of their private studying.(20)

Direct questioning obviously must be used with discretion. One is more likely to get a response from indirect enquiries and open-ended free choice questions.(20) Questions demanding 'right' answers are to be avoided, as are those with only a single possible reply, and conversely so are those whose implications are so vast that no-one is likely to know where to begin with it. Directive questions, requiring definite answers, perhaps from specific people, have a use in moving events forward when discussion stagnates.

While we hope that the students will rapidly learn to ask everyone to expand what they say, to challenge them to produce reasons or evidence, to request information or guidance, it is also to be hoped that few tutors need to demonstrate their independence in the same way. Their main use of questions should be for linking and exploring. The tutor points to issues that have been neglected by asking questions, he invites students to seek connections by enquiries that subtly point to a hook or an eye. He occasionally re-focuses discussion by relating a statement or a question to another topic.

Some new university teachers might find it profitable to explore the use of micro-teaching techniques as a means of developing specific skills such as ways of using questions. Such techniques seek to specify skills

precisely and to allow student teachers to practise them under controlled conditions. These are laboratory conditions where everything is scaled down; the complexity of the teaching situation, the context, the size of the group, the duration of the 'lesson' are all reduced. A 'lesson' is conducted and recorded, usually on videotape, and the student teacher can immediately play it back. He, with or without a counsellor, can then evaluate it immediately, analysing it perhaps on a specially prepared self-evaluation sheet. He may be shown 'model lessons' that demonstrate the use and misuse of the specified skills. He is then able to 'reteach' the 'lesson'.[21]

The university teacher in the tutoring situation is not, of course, usually concerned with 'teaching lessons'. Micro-teaching was initially developed as a technique for training school teachers. However the technique has been successfully applied to the problems of university teaching. In respect of questioning skills tutors can learn to use higher order questions. These have been shown to result in a build up of higher order responses and a significant reduction of the time taken up by the tutor talking.[22]

10. HABITS

In seeking to analyse the ways in which you conduct discussion groups never forget that both good habits (like turning questions back into the group or repeating points that have been made), and bad habits (like direct questioning and saying "Good point"), are not always good or bad habits but are <u>always</u> bad if they become habits.

PART III

NOT EVERYONE TAKES PART

As you set about waking up your tutorials and seminars ask yourself whether it matters that some students are silent. Variable attenders, who sit at the periphery and rarely take part, do not perform significantly better or worse in examinations than anyone else.[23] Besides, reticence may be entirely personal or so much of the hour and 'just where they are' that one cannot coerce students to take part. Still, there are general factors at work in a group that can inhibit participation and should be combated.

1. INHIBITORY FACTORS

Agreement blocks discussion. Individuals may be inhibited by shyness. Others make their points. They may have nothing to say. The group may be too large or there may be a lack of opportunity to speak. Many tutors habitually talk for over 50% of the time available.[24] Ten students meeting for one hour then have just 3 minutes each to express themselves, and there are talkative students to contend with too. Those who need least practice get most.

Tutors can severely impede the flow of a discussion. Such tutors are they who ask a great many closed, yes/no

questions and those who ask open questions but ignore many of the responses since they are waiting for one that follows a line the tutor had in mind. Tutors who ask complex questions and do not wait for students to work them out, but rather re-phrase them repeatedly until they may be reduced to a simple closed question - they stifle responsiveness. Tutors who make a first contribution that is too formal, elegant, erudite, complex or too remote from the point at which the group might be expected to begin will find that no-one does begin. Discussion begins 'where you are' and tends to move outwards along familiar paths. Thus start with what is known and allow a desultory and conversational reconnoitring. Without participation there will be no disciplined productive examination of topics anyway. The reticent need an open situation in which to break the ice and the best time is when things are expansive and comfortable to begin with. Similarly, be careful that introductory questions invite answers that are well within the present competence of most of the group.

Personal reticence is clearly not the only bar to participation. Over-participation by the tutor, the talkative, the combative and the social stars may silence others, either by taking up all the time or by insisting that their frame of reference and their views prevail. They talk things out; they brook no opposition. By being too persuasive, and too convincing, by sparkling so brightly that everyone else feels dull they leave nothing further for anyone to say. On the other hand a group may be so formal and so repressive of personal expression that a heavy apathy may descend which is difficult to dispel.

Students may be held back too by feelings of propriety. The social climate may be such that a low ranking in the group may mean one's contribution will not get a hearing or that divergent issues are not welcome. Then 'not-understanding' is widely held to be an unsuitable topic.[25] Students will only raise it if they are invited to and otherwise pass the time going through the form of understanding and pretending to follow the discussion. Interrupting the linear flow is also thought to be improper. So if a student is slow to formulate his thoughts, or if connections only emerge gradually it may seem impossible to refer back to the relevant point. Again the quick and articulate dominate. It is pleasing to the scholar when discussion follows the logic of his discipline or the patterns he would have chosen. Orderly progression will also be gratifying to the contributors. Feelings of impropriety may be justified since anyone returning to a prior point may be cut out or ignored. Clearly a tutor who has prepared notes and conscientiously thought about the lines that might be taken will have to be careful to defend the right of others to diverge and to cast back and forth. Should you encourage students to be less ready to shut up? May discussions not be livelier when pulled in several directions at once and may they not be ultimately more fruitful? What then does one do about the talkative?

2. WHAT THE TUTOR CAN DO TO FACILITATE PARTICIPATION

Consider the need for adequate student preparation. It can be very dampening to have to listen to everyone doing their thinking out loud from scratch every time. This is not to deny that talking off the top of your head and

thinking as you go along may uncover seams of vivid, unexpected, stimulating ideas. Still the pooling of ignorance remains folly. If no formal work is required students can at least be asked to prepare some common ground by each being asked to mull over one thought-provoking statement relating to some aspect of a central theme. They may think some of their way towards a point of view before the meeting. This is dealt with more fully in "Patterns and Procedures". The tutor must learn to be sensitive to every indication that someone is prepared to speak - nods, leaning forward, alertness, "Mmm's" and "H'mm's?". The invitation to speak need be no more than an expectant look, a direct smile or an open gesture with the hands.

Check that you have provided for some talk of the distinction between personal and intellectual challenges, the bounds of relevance, the lawfulness of referring back to earlier points and the acceptance of a criterion for approval that is an acknowledgement of all kinds of positive contributions to the task in hand. Some of these distinctions may have been made at a preliminary meeting. Should one remind the group of this? Has it become increasingly competitive since then?

When there is a high level of non-participation it may be sensible to change to another working format. The group's work can be organised so that sub-groups work together on a small project or assignment that engages them in forming their own views before they are exposed to more authoritative ones. Another change might be to duplicate students' class papers, translations and so on and to circulate them round the class before meetings.

The students can then discuss how well they, and others, have succeeded in achieving what they set out to do, what problems they have not solved and how they might now jointly attack them. They can also examine new points or points of interest arising from the scrutiny of each other's papers. If this is done outside the context of assessment the students measure themselves against each other and avoid the imbalance in tutor-individual student confrontations. This may favourably alter the atmosphere of the group in a way that can be quite surprising.

3. HOW CAN THE TALKATIVE BE ENCOURAGED TO LISTEN?

The most usual tactic is for the tutor, (or one of the students assuming the leadership) to intervene firmly when the talker pauses and to invite someone else to comment on the last few points. A third student is asked to evaluate these comments, a fourth to make inferences and so on. Another mild check on the loquacious may be to seat them next to each other and opposite the silent. On no account let them sit directly opposite each other, nor opposite the tutor.[26]

The principle purpose of participatory discussion is ignored when a large part of the available time is given over to mutually enlivening dialogues between the tutor and only one, or perhaps two, of the students. A formative dialogue underlies all discussion but ideally it will be implicit in the experience of the whole group. The tutor must be on guard against the keen student taking up the strategic seat directly opposite him, ready to engage swords; he does not pick up the gage.

Otherwise he and his adversary, hot to carry the contest and to put points to the test of the listening audience, end up cutting across each other's comments, taking over whatever is said and twisting it back to their personal argument. The presence of the audience makes this dialogue significantly different from the traditional Oxbridge tutorial but, nevertheless, where the urge to such argument is strong and the tutor can give time to those who wish to learn through conflict perhaps personal tutorials can be arranged or informal public debates can be set up.

For more intrusive offenders severer restrictions may be necessary. Break down the size of the group - this can be done progressively. To begin with tasks can be distributed among large sub-groups but ultimately they may have to be structured for 'learning cells' of only two students.[27] Breaking down and re-structuring the activities of the group as a whole is another way. For instance, the use of formal procedures and the allocation of specific roles to particular students may restrict the talkers. It may be possible to isolate a really dominating student by appointing him to be the group's observer or reporter. Many groups habitually arrange for there to be a short period during their meetings for evaluating how effectively they are coping with their tasks and how well they are co-operating. It would be comparatively easy to make this the responsibility of a single student. He would keep out of discussions but be asked to note, and later give an account of, who hogs the stage, who is listened to, whether all contributions are acknowledged, all suggestions taken up and so forth.

Finally you might like to experiment with peer-teaching. Arrange for students in pairs, or in sub-groups, to alternate the roles of teacher and taught. The 'teachers' could, for example, prepare a lecture, a tape-recording, film, slides or demonstrations centred on a specific topic, or prepare a file of research papers, data and illustrations as the basis for discussing a topic. The 'taught' may be more vociferous critics of their teachers than they are of their tutor. Cowan[28] feels strongly that this kind of exercise should not be an academic one; what is taught should be examinable!

4. AND THE SILENT TO JOIN IN?

Must they, we would ask again? Students dislike being 'pounced' upon, since a rebuke is implied.[29] They may also resent being drawn in by name and questioned directly.[30] If they were reluctant before, they may now become increasingly embarrassed.[31]

Still, it may be possible to shift the discussion around, unobtrusively, so that points 'emerge' on which it is known the silent student has some special knowledge or formed views. Try to ensure that they do not sit out on a limb or in the tutor's shadow.

PART IV
THE SWING OF THE PENDULUM

If a major strength of small group teaching is that it can foster the kind of learning that stems from personal interaction, as the next booklet in the group "A Kind of Learning" shows, then we take participatory discussion to be a particularly valuable example of this. But the importance of informal interactive learning within formal systems of education has, some think, been over-emphasised. Pendulums swing and there has lately been a call for a return to more formal procedures, tighter structuring and firmer didactic control. Has this been a response to the fervour with which interactive learning has been advocated rather than to its widespread adoption - has formality in fact been abandoned to any great extent in university small group teaching? (In Britain the investigations of the Nuffield Group suggest that this is not the case.)[32] Talk about the 'mania for informality' sounds extreme as does the counter-cry "Let's have learning not schooling!" but there may be some justice in accusations that anti-intellectualism results when informality leads to a group relaxing its purposeful grasp on a subject. However, participatory discussion is too valuable a learning method to be neglected because it is open to abuse. Skill in conducting open discussions should be seen as one of the many that the teacher-as-craftsman can master. Neither interactive discussion nor firm 'teaching' can suit all

the purposes that group work may be intended to achieve. A tutor will use methods that suit his several purposes and the needs of the different groups he teaches.

There are many questions a tutor must answer before he decides how to conduct small group teaching; some of the obviously important ones are set out in these booklets. The way in which they are answered will always depend on a group's maturity: the level of each course, the stage the students are at, their experience of group work. Where relatively informal participatory discussion does seem appropriate the tutor cannot view this as a "soft option"; careful preparation is as essential here as it is for any other kind of group work. Students must know what their work in the group is going to be, what it is intended to achieve and how they are expected to function beforehand. Sorting these questions out during working meetings is less effective than the whole group being prepared before they come to the first meeting. Thereafter it will be necessary for both tutor and students to do whatever homework is necessary for all the meetings that follow.

In "Patterns and Procedures" there is a section on the value of a preliminary procedural meeting. This permits a discussion group to learn something about the processes of discussion before they begin work. Similarly the various kinds of disciplined enquiry can be expounded and, more importantly, demonstrated before the handling of a topic is begun. There can be discussion of the personal value element in views, of the new standards that apply after the transition from school to university or from introductory general courses to specialist courses. There

can be discussion too of the relation between the overlapping goals of personal development and the acquisition of knowledge and skills, and analysis and ordering of knowledge for particular purposes, and of the need to practise finer and finer discriminations in academic work. Students can also be referred to booklets such as this and can be shown video-tapes of small group practices in order to learn something about discussion skills.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

ABERCROMBIE, M.L.J. (1974) *Aims and Techniques of Group Teaching (3rd edition)*

London: S.R.H.E.

RUDDUCK, J. (1974) *Small Group Teaching and Learning, Handbook II (Trial Edition)*

Norwich: University of East Anglia, U.G.C. Small Group Teaching Project.

Material from this trial handbook has now been incorporated in *Small Group Teaching* (1976). London: The Nuffield Foundation.

Both are valuable contributions to the small group literature and in concentrating on the practical problems of the tutor they encourage him to question his role, responsibilities and attitudes.

ABERCROMBIE, M.L.J. and TERRY, P.M. (1974) *Learning in Groups.*

University of London, Audio-Visual Centre.

This collection of video-tapes includes recordings edited to emphasise topics such as 'The First Ten Minutes'; 'Facilitating Interaction'; 'Problems of Authority'; and 'Peer Tutoring'.

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